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Chair

Mrs. Deborah Schulte

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mrs. Deborah Schulte (King—Vaughan, Lib.)): We'll get started. Today we have in front of us the reports of the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development, spring, 2018.

I had the pleasure of chairing the meeting where you introduced your reports. They are very pertinent to our committee and to the fisheries committee. Thank you very much for coming today with your team. I'll just introduce them, if I may: Sharon Clark, principal; Andrew Hayes, principal; and, Kimberley Leach, principal. You've been in front of us many times, and we do appreciate having you back here.

Of course, we have Julie Gelfand, the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development. We have you here for an hour. Then we have the departments from 12 to 1.

I'll give you the floor, Commissioner.

Ms. Julie Gelfand (Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Office of the Auditor General): Thank you so much. I'm really pleased to be here today to discuss our spring 2018 reports, which were tabled in the House of Commons last Tuesday.

Sharon Clark was the principal on the salmon aquaculture/salmon farming chapter, Andrew Hayes was the principal on the biodiversity chapter, and Kim Leach was the principal on the sustainable development goals. That's just so you know which ones they were responsible for.

These audits show that the Government of Canada's efforts to achieve sustainable development are still falling short of integrating the economy, society, and the environment. This is not the first time I've raised this concern.

[*Translation*]

In these spring 2018 audits, we assessed Canada's readiness to achieve the United Nations' 2030 agenda for sustainable development. We also examined salmon farming and conserving biodiversity. In all three, we found examples where the federal government was not integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development.

In our audit, we examined whether Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency oversaw the salmon farming industry to protect wild fish. This industry creates risks for wild fish, including exposure to diseases, drugs and pesticides.

[*English*]

We found that Fisheries and Oceans Canada does conduct research on these and other risks. We also found that the department determines where salmon farms can be located or expanded and under what conditions farms may operate.

However, we found that Fisheries and Oceans Canada had no national standard for nets and other equipment to prevent escapes from fish farms, nor did it adequately enforce compliance with aquaculture regulations. As well, the department had not set limits on the amount of drugs and pesticides that fish farms can use to treat diseases and parasites. This is important because drugs and pesticides used in salmon farming can harm wild fish, especially those living on the ocean floor.

The department had completed only one-tenth of risk assessments for key known diseases, and it was not addressing new and emerging diseases. Most importantly, we found that the department was not monitoring the health of wild fish. As a result, Fisheries and Oceans Canada had no way of knowing what impacts salmon farming has on the health of wild fish.

● (1110)

[*Translation*]

These findings led us to conclude that Fisheries and Oceans Canada had not managed risks from salmon farming in a way that protected wild fish. Among our recommendations, we stated that the department should clearly articulate the level of risk to wild fish that it accepts when enabling the aquaculture industry.

Moving on now to biodiversity, our audit examined whether Environment and Climate Change Canada had provided the national leadership required to meet Canada's 2020 biodiversity commitment.

In our view, Canada will not meet its commitment. We found that the five federal departments and agencies we audited had made uneven progress in their efforts to meet six specific biodiversity targets. In addition, Environment and Climate Change Canada had not provided the required national leadership and coordination.

[*English*]

Environment and Climate Change Canada has focused its leadership efforts on attending international meetings on behalf of Canada, creating national committees, and coordinating the production of reports. However, the department did not coordinate actions with its federal, provincial, and territorial partners to achieve the 2020 biodiversity targets.

Let's turn to our audit which looked at seven federal departments and agencies to assess whether the government was prepared to implement the United Nations' 2030 agenda for sustainable development. This audit is Canada's contribution to an effort by auditors general from around the world to assess their government's preparedness to implement international sustainable development commitments.

Canada adopted the 2030 agenda in 2015 as part of a worldwide effort to achieve the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals. These goals call for action in many areas to achieve a sustainable world, including quality education, sustainable cities, economic growth, and biodiversity conservation. Three years since making this commitment, the government is not prepared to implement the United Nations' 2030 agenda. It does not have a whole-of-government approach, and leadership to implement is split among five departments.

In my opinion, it's difficult to make progress with 10 hands on the wheel.

[*Translation*]

We also found that the government has no communication or engagement strategy to include other levels of government and Canadians. Lastly, it has yet to develop a complete set of national targets.

Although data is being collected to measure Canada's performance against the 2030 agenda's global indicators, we found no system to measure, monitor and report on progress against national targets once they are defined.

Without a clear leader, an implementation plan, and accurate and ongoing measurement and monitoring of results, Canada will not be able to fulfill the commitments it made to its citizens, and to the United Nations.

Given the risks to sustainable development we identified in these and in previous audits, we still have not seen the federal government integrate in a meaningful way the economy, society and the environment.

That concludes my opening remarks. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll start questioning with Mr. Aldag.

Mr. John Aldag (Cloverdale—Langley City, Lib.): Thank you, and good morning, everyone.

I appreciate and commend you again for the excellent reports that your team has done. I had a chance to read them over the last few days.

I was particularly interested in the salmon farming report, and that's where I'll tend to focus my questions. Coming from British Columbia, salmon and the health of our wild salmon stock are very important to us.

I have a couple of questions. One of them that struck me in the report was this idea of having DFO as the protector of wild salmon stock, but also, it seemed to be the promoter of aquaculture, of fish farming. It struck me that there may be a potential for conflict in that role.

I didn't see that clearly come out in the report. You talk about both roles, but did you get into exploring if DFO is best positioned to do that? It seemed that perhaps someone else, like CFIA, might be better positioned to be the champion of fish farming, and let DFO focus on the protection of the wild fish stock.

Are you able to provide any comment on whether that was part of your considerations? Did you explore that aspect of departmental responsibility?

● (1115)

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We did talk a little about that. This was mentioned in the Cohen commission report on the same issue. The way I would describe it is that I think Fisheries and Oceans Canada is at risk of claims that it prioritizes aquaculture over the protection of wild fish. Let me tell you why I think it's at risk.

There was no threshold for action when wild fish stocks decline. If a wild fish stock goes down, there's no threshold at which the department clicks into gear.

There was no validation of industry self-reporting on the use of drugs and pesticides. The industry provides those reports, but there is no system to find out if those reports are valid, no system at all.

There was no requirement to minimize the development of resistance to drugs and pesticides on the part of industry and no requirement for it to monitor the ocean floor near or underneath those pens.

We found little enforcement of aquaculture regulations. We also found that long-term funding is given for research done with the aquaculture industry, and I guess in support of the industry. The research that's done in support of the department doing the regulating is only supported by short-term funding. Given that whole picture, we think the department is at risk of being seen as prioritizing one over the other.

In terms of where the government may think about moving if it decides to split, it's Parliament's job to make that decision. I'm not sure that the CFIA would be the right place. The places you could look at, or that have been mentioned by other people, include Agriculture Canada, because this is farming; Industry Canada, because this is an industry; and Natural Resources Canada, because this is a natural resource. Any one of those three I know have been discussed if the regulatory role is split from the promoter-of-the-industry role. I don't think that CFIA would be the right one, personally. Those would be some the government could think about.

Mr. John Aldag: You mentioned some of the components being added to open net pens for disease control and growth, and things like that. I didn't see it in the report, but did you at all explore the idea of closed pens versus open net pens? I was surprised to see there weren't regulations or national standards for things like open net.

I wonder if there are other alternatives we should be looking at, such as closed net, and if you have any observations on that, if you did any exploration of that topic.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: That's not something we audited, although we mention in our report that in some cases, that is happening. Right now, closed pen on land is used to raise the fish to a certain size, and then they're put into the ocean. That's not something we looked at in our audit. It is something that may be coming in the future.

Mr. John Aldag: I understand that on the west coast, there are some small closed pens inland. I think it's Kuterra that is often cited. They've had some support from the government for the work they've done.

I wondered if that had been looked at. Obviously not. I think there may be opportunities to explore that down the road.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: You'll see a little bit in our report. Paragraph 1.5 is more in the "Context" area as opposed to our "Findings".

Mr. John Aldag: Thank you.

I was also struck a bit by the differences in Canada. On the west coast, salmon really is part of our identity. It's part of the indigenous culture. It's very intertwined with our identity as British Columbians and west coasters.

I wonder how consistent the regulations are on the east coast versus the west coast or if there is an opportunity to have different regulations for B.C. versus Atlantic Canada and if that was part of the exploration.

● (1120)

Ms. Julie Gelfand: What I can tell you is that on the west coast, there are Pacific aquaculture regulations that are specific to the west coast. There is not such a thing for the east coast, but the Fisheries Act applies on both coasts. That's how it works right now.

Mr. John Aldag: Does that serve us in protecting...?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: That would be a question you would have to ask the minister.

Mr. John Aldag: Okay.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Sopuck.

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Neepawa, CPC): Thank you very much.

I see that at the very beginning, Commissioner, you have a definition of biological diversity. It's basically everything that's out there, the variety of species, ecosystems and ecological processes found on earth. It's a very broad definition.

In terms of species in Canada, what would be the goal of biodiversity conservation? Is it basically saving every single species in Canada? Is it native species only? Is it native plus introduced species? What should be our priorities?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Unfortunately, I can't tell you what the priorities are. I do know that Canada has set 19 goals. Those were determined in 2015. They are in four areas: protection of lands and waters, the area of sustainability, information to Canadians, and having Canadians connected to nature. Those are the some of the goals that Canada has set out already.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Okay.

I'm very much an on the ground kind of conservationist. I was struck when you said, and correct me if I'm wrong, that Environment Canada is spending a lot of time in meetings travelling around the world. It sounds like that it's at the expense of actual on-the-ground conservation.

Is that a fair comment?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: In terms of on-the-ground conservation, we looked at six targets specifically. They have reached a couple of those targets already.

They have an inventory of their protected areas. That's one target they've reached. Statistics Canada has some work on the issue of natural capital. That's another one they have already reached.

One they are likely to reach on the ground, or in the ocean in this case, would be the target to achieve 10% protected areas in the marine zone. They are not likely to reach the 17% on the terrestrial side.

As well, we looked at two other targets. It doesn't look like they are going to reach the species at risk target.

Agricultural lands would be another target. That was a target of maintaining or increasing biodiversity on agricultural lands. We don't think they're going to reach that target, and the one on water pollution as well.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: I noticed that on page 4, when you talk about wetlands, grasslands, and deciduous Carolinian forests, those plant and animal communities largely exist on the privately owned landscape. It's quite clear to me that the main biodiversity issues are on privately owned land.

In your view, is habitat protection the only tool to conserve biodiversity?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We didn't look at that issue of habitat conservation.

Obviously, as the theory has it, yes, habitat conservation is one of ways of protecting biodiversity, but that's not a question we looked at in our audit.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: That's interesting.

On page 20 you talk about about the capacity of agricultural lands to conserve wildlife. I had an interesting meeting with Croplife Canada. One thing that's omitted from your report is the contribution of modern intensive agriculture to biodiversity conservation and the fact that farming is now done on less land than it needs to be done. For example, if we abandon all modern farm practices such as chemicals and fertilizers, at least in terms of canola, we would have to farm 19 million more acres or basically 14 million more football fields of land. Modern agriculture is a terrific conservation tool because there is much land that can be left for conservation.

It's a characteristic of modern agriculture that's always overlooked. When I drive through my own rural constituency, there's still lots of wildlife habitat. The best land is being farmed even better, producing as much as it ever did, while reserving the rest of the land for conservation. I find that interesting.

The reason I asked the question about habitat protection is that one thing that's always missing in biodiversity conservation is the role of active human management of diversity. I would draw your attention to a very interesting program by the National Audubon Society, North America's leading bird conservation society.

As you know, Commissioner, grassland birds are very much in trouble. The Audubon Society started a program called conservation ranching, wherein regenerative grazing practices are adopted that mimic the past grazing by bison. I could go on. It seems to me that people in government and organizations always forget the role of the people who live on the land. Not only do they have traditional knowledge of fish and wildlife on their land, they know the techniques to conserve them.

Can you make a quick comment on the role of local, traditional knowledge in farming and ranching in terms of biodiversity conservation?

● (1125)

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We looked at the issue of whether Environment Canada was playing a leadership role in achieving the 2020 biodiversity targets, and we found that they had defined their role as leader quite narrowly. They had not worked with their federal-provincial-territorial or even NGO partners to come up with a plan to achieve the targets.

The Chair: Okay, before I move to our next questioner, I just want to recognize and welcome MP Dan Albas. Thank you very much for joining us today.

I see Elizabeth May is also with us at the table. Thank you.

Ms. Duncan.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): I'm sure that Ed would love to pass over his questions to Elizabeth in his absence.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Ms. Linda Duncan: Just following on our colleague's questions on agriculture, I have to share, Madam Commissioner, that I am a little stunned. A program I worked with, Prairie Farmers to Save, was a community pasture program. It was a remarkable program that had very little infusion of federal dollars. It helped small farmers to maintain biodiversity, as there were a lot of threatened species in this community pasture, including Govenlock. In its wisdom, the Conservative government killed the community pasture program, which is now going to go under the plow, and we're going to lose the biodiversity and the access to that program for small farmers. I just wanted to add that.

I want to thank you again, as I did when you did your briefing, on two further important reports. I have to say it's getting discouraging, though I'm pleased that you and your team continue to do your hard work and your honest assessment.

We had you in very recently, Commissioner, on sustainable development. Of course, our committee is also reviewing the bill the government has put forward to, in theory, strengthen the Federal Sustainable Development Act. In their wisdom, they have still not brought that bill back, so we have to go on the basis of what the bill provides right now.

You've made some recommendations to strengthen and to provide direction, and in fact one of your complaints is that there is no whole-of-government approach, either on biodiversity or on sustainable development goals, but we have the cabinet directive and we have the Federal Sustainable Development Act as it is.

On the basis of your report, what are the most critical measures the current government needs to take to actually start being taken seriously about delivering on the sustainable development goals?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We are doing an audit right now on the use of the strategic environmental assessment tool, and I'll be reporting that this fall. As you know, we've been looking at that tool over the last five years in each department, looking at whether the strategic environmental assessment tool has been used when programs go to ministers and when programs go to cabinet. We've been doing that four or five departments at a time over five years. This year right now that's happening. We're going to all 26 departments where they have to use it and we're looking at one slice: how they are using the strategic environmental assessment tool when they go to cabinet. We will be able to report to you on progress in the use of that tool in the fall.

In terms of the sustainable development goals, as I said, this is an initiative that auditors general around the world are working on. We expect 80 audits to be done, hopefully by this July—within the next year anyhow—and hopefully many more will be doing that over the course of a year and a half, because a whole bunch of countries are being trained now on how to do this audit. The audit is looking at whether governments are prepared to implement the 17 sustainable development goals.

All of use around the world are looking at a variety of things. Is there a high level of engagement? Canada got a check-off for that. The Prime Minister made a speech at the UN and said clearly that the SDGs apply to Canada. We were then looking for a plan, an overall all-of-government plan. We did not find that. We did not find the engagement strategy with communities and with other levels of government, and frankly even with the other government departments. We found five government departments were involved. What about the rest? There are five departments that are the lead. It's not as if they're doing nothing. They are doing some activities, but in their zones as opposed to looking globally at whether we're ready to implement.

On the area of data, we had three criteria. Do they have a measurement system, a monitoring system, and a reporting system? Statistics Canada has found indicators for about 70 of the global indicators, so it has found data, but Canada has yet to set its own national targets. That's something that Canada has to do.

Therefore, if you look at the seven criteria that all the auditors general from around the world are looking at to see if their governments are ready to implement, Canada ticks the box on about two of them. There is still lots for Canada to do.

In the last budget, the government announced a sustainable development goal unit and some money, but we did not audit that. Next time we go in, hopefully we'll see that.

The last thing I want to say on the sustainable development goals is that our office is looking at these quite seriously. The Auditor General will be looking at all the sustainable development goals and all the work that we do in audit and in identifying which areas are high risk—so our office has been SDG'ed, if you will. We'll be looking for audits that link to the SDGs, not just from the commissioner but from the Auditor General as well.

● (1130)

Ms. Linda Duncan: It will be important to go after more than one of 17. The government seems fixated on feminism, not the other 16.

I do have another question for you about your continued concerns about the failure to deliver on obligations on biodiversity. What can be done to send the message to the government that it actually has binding legal obligations regarding endangered species?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I would say we made some recommendations in our report and the government needs to implement those recommendations, as it has agreed to.

The Chair: Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Churence Rogers (Bonavista—Burin—Trinity, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to commend you for your report. Thank you for the amount of detail you've included.

Just by way of information, I come from a very rural background in Newfoundland and Labrador. Rural communities, of course, saw aquaculture as an opportunity, as an economic development opportunity, particularly after 1992 with the closure of the wild fishery and the moratorium that has existed ever since, for the last 26 or 27 years.

So aquaculture is being promoted by the province and identified as an opportunity to grow fish to feed the world's masses, to sustain rural communities, and to create jobs. We have many bays and extensive coastlines that seem to be ideal environments for growing fish in the nets and the pens that they use in Newfoundland and Labrador at the moment.

It seems to me, based on a recent conference I attended, that they've made substantial progress in Newfoundland and Labrador in the aquaculture industry. I read your report, and of course I realize it's national in scope and that you're reviewing the entire industry across the country. Do you see any significant differences in the various jurisdictions, say, from B.C. to Newfoundland and Labrador to New Brunswick? Is there an area where you could say they've done it right, or are all of them challenged? Have they all made some significant improvements, or do they all have challenges to meet in order to cover this industry properly?

● (1135)

Ms. Julie Gelfand: My mandate only covers the federal government. I'm only allowed to audit the federal government, so I looked at its role in regulating this industry. In the Atlantic provinces, this industry is regulated for the most part by the provinces. In British Columbia, it is regulated by the federal government. It used to be regulated by the province and now it's regulated by the federal government.

What I can say is that the Auditor General of Nova Scotia audited aquaculture in that province. Nobody has looked specifically yet at Newfoundland, as far as I know.

Mr. Churence Rogers: I was surprised to read in the report that there were no aquaculture enforcement officers in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: There are no additional ones.

Mr. Churence Rogers: I just wondered how the existence of these enforcement officers dedicated solely to aquaculture would improve the regulatory approach to salmon farming. Is it fair to say that regulations surrounding the drugs and pesticides were developed with a focus on salmon farming and not on wild populations?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: The regulations around drugs and pesticides would be for salmon farming. We found there were no limits to the amount and timing of drugs and pesticides used in those pens. We found that industry did have to report to DFO on when they used those pesticides and how much, but there was no validation of those reports.

The regulations were aimed at helping prevent diseases in the farmed pens. They were not written for impacts on wild fish. As well, we found that they don't know if the regulations on drugs and pesticides are good enough to prevent impacts on wild fish, and they also don't know if they need regulations for the cumulative effects. Let's say there are five or six pens in one area, and they're all using drugs and pesticides. The department hasn't determined whether they need rules and regulations around the cumulative effects.

Mr. Churence Rogers: I appreciate the comments, and I'm really concerned about some of the things you've identified, because if we are to grow the industry, and if it's to be a sustainable industry in the future, obviously all these things need to be addressed and identified.

I was also wondering whether there was a national standard for nets and other equipment. In your view, why is such a standard important?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: The biggest fish escapes in Canada have occurred in the Atlantic region, not so much in the Pacific region, and it's the Pacific region where there are these national standards, because they're regulated by DFO. So a recommendation is that DFO talk to their counterparts in the Atlantic region to see if, on the east coast, they can establish and use the standards that are used on the west coast. Right now those are regulated by the province.

I could also say that I discussed this report with the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, Minister LeBlanc. He was really appreciative of our audit. He said it would help contribute to a good dialogue on the industry and its future.

From my perspective, I found more gaps in this audit than in any other audit I've ever done. These gaps are big. Nobody is monitoring the health of wild fish. There are no limits on the use of drugs and pesticides.

It's not as if the department is doing no work. They are doing work. They do have conditions of operation, they do research, but in my opinion the gaps that we found were quite large.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That's it.

Mr. Sopuck.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Thank you.

I just want to correct the record.

Ms. Duncan talked about community pastures as if they were all disappearing. It's simply not true. I have in front of me here the report from the Association of Manitoba Community Pastures. They operate 20 community pastures throughout Manitoba, many in my own constituency. They manage over 350,000 acres of provincial land and provide all kinds of environmental benefits including water filtration, carbon sequestration, and species at risk.

I'd recommend that Ms. Duncan do her research first before she makes a vast conclusion that all these pastures will be ploughed up. They certainly will not. The ownership has been transferred to local people who are managing it for conservation, biodiversity, and beef production, and doing it extremely well.

Commissioner, have you come across any evidence that open net-pen aquaculture has directly affected populations of wild salmon?

● (1140)

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We were looking to see whether the department had that information. What we found is that nobody is monitoring the health of wild fish; therefore, the department doesn't really know if net pen farming is affecting wild salmon stocks. We also found that there was no threshold for action. If there is a decline in a stock, there is no threshold at which point the department would have to take some action.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Aquaculture started in British Columbia in 1986, and in 2010 and 2014, under our watch I might add, the sockeye salmon runs in the Fraser were at record highs, especially in 2014. How could that happen when net pen aquaculture had been practised since 1986?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I can't make that link. We didn't look at that link in our report. I can tell you—and this is public information—that the State of Alaska and the State of Washington have decided to no longer have open net-pen aquaculture. The only place in North American on the west coast where there will be salmon aquaculture will be off the coast of British Columbia.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Basically, they did it without any definitive evidence of the effect on wild fish stocks.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Sorry?

Mr. Robert Sopuck: I just stated that they basically did that without any evidence showing that net pen aquaculture can negatively affect their stocks.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I don't know on what basis.... I do know that the department was supposed to complete 10 risk assessments on key diseases, and they had only completed one out of those 10.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: All the people who want to get rid of net pen aquaculture think that the net pens will just go onshore close to where they are now. I guarantee you that prairie Canada will the prime location for closed containment aquaculture for a whole number of factors, including access to market. If net pen aquaculture were closed down, the Prairies will certainly benefit.

In terms of net pen aquaculture, you talk about the benthic environment. When we studied closed containment aquaculture at the fisheries committee, it was shown that the benthic organisms recover in about three years, assuming that they rotate and move these pens around. Is it your finding that DFO requires the net pens to be moved on a regular basis to allow the benthic ecosystem to recover?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We did not look at that, unfortunately.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: It seems to me that that would be a major factor. It's like crop rotation or a clear-cut forest being allowed to grow back again. Our study showed that the benthic organisms did come back.

Getting back to the—

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Sorry, Bob, I can tell you that DFO does set conditions for site locations and expansions. They have prohibited new and expanded sites in areas of high salmon migration. They have done that. They set conditions to monitor and control diseases and pests. They also do fish health audits and sea lice inspections, so they are doing that work.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Yes, that's all fine, but the only question that matters is whether wild stocks are being affected That's the only thing that counts.

Getting back to your biodiversity report, on page 3 you looked at species population declines in Canada. The source you used was the World Wildlife Fund Canada. Since it is an activist group, that is a very suspect source in my view. For example, you say that "Fish populations declined 20%". That's a broad generalization. I find it ironic that the sturgeon, a species I've done research on in a previous life, is the iconic species that you've used there, yet the Fraser River sturgeon populations are estimated to be at 60,000 fish, and in Manitoba, the sturgeon populations, through terrific conservation work, are increasing dramatically. This is such a broad-brush table, how could we even consider this to be accurate?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We indicated in paragraph 3.8 several public reports that have highlighted Canada's biodiversity challenges. These reports are publicly available. We are simply providing you with them for context or perspective. They are not one of our findings.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Again, it's in your report, and people are going to assume that all fish are down by 20%, all reptiles and amphibians are down 34%, all big game are down 43%. I can tell you that white-tailed deer are almost at pest proportions in much of Canada. Again, these kinds of generalizations really aren't helpful.

Thank you very much.

● (1145)

The Chair: Mr. Bossio.

Mr. Mike Bossio (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, Lib.): As always, it's a great pleasure to have you here, Commissioner, at the committee.

I would like to challenge you on a couple of areas around sustainability and the SDGs, and what our government is doing, including our focus on inequality and some of the challenges that we face as a society around that, and competitiveness, and demographic changes, climate change, including the environment and biodiversity in these areas.

How do we address some of these? I think it goes much broader than the focused lens you've put in here, especially when we talk about a whole-of-government approach around equality, the Canada child benefit, the guaranteed income supplement, the tax cut, the Canada workers benefit, the massive investments in affordable housing, and applying a gender-based lens to the budgets, investment in child care, the increases in parental leave.

On the competitiveness front, you have the massive investments in infrastructure and innovation, and the impact they have on helping our industry to become more competitive and productive, creating greater economic growth. On the indigenous front, you have the ending of drinking water advisories, massive investments in education, affordable housing, health care, and languages as well.

On the climate change front and the environment and biodiversity front, you have the $1.3 billion invested in the protected spaces, the $1.5 billion invested in the oceans protection plan, the price on carbon, the investments in public transit. Once again, you have the innovation in green technology, the investments in infrastructure on water and waste water. It goes on and on.

As you know, Rome wasn't built in a day. A lot of these investments and policy developments of ours are going to take time to bear fruit. You note that Statistics Canada has developed a data framework to measure results on the 232 global indicators, but hasn't compiled that data yet. You have also pointed out that in budget 2018 we have proposed providing $49.4 million over 13 years, starting in 2018-19, to establish a sustainable development goals unit.

Would you not agree that these investments and this whole-of-government approach, the massive consultations that have gone on with the provinces and indigenous communities, etc., in all of these different areas really do point to our moving in the direction of the sustainable development goals? The plan that will be developed by this new unit, I think, will point to these investments that we're making.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We have to be really clear here. I was looking to see whether or not the government was prepared to implement... and we had seven specific criteria. Was a there commitment and responsibility identified? Canada got a tick mark for that. Have they established a governance structure for a whole-of-government approach to this? Have they done engagement and consultation with Canadians? Have they done the planning? Do they have a measuring system, a monitoring system, and a reporting system? Those are the seven things we were looking at.

You'll see in our report that we identified the five lead departments. In fact, they were identified by the government. We indicated what the five departments had done. Many of them had started to match what they were doing to the SDGs. What we are looking for, what auditors general are looking for, is this. You've signed on to these. Have you developed targets for the ones that apply to Canada? Have you identified what is high risk to Canada? Have you identified targets for that? Do you have a plan to achieve them in all the areas?

What the government has done to date is it has said, "We're doing a feminist systems policy. That links to SDG X. We're doing climate change. That links to SDG 13." What I guess auditors would look at is this. You've signed on to the objectives. Look at all of them; look at all the targets. Decide which ones will be Canadian targets, and develop a whole-of-government plan, including working with the provinces and territories, and with Canadians, in terms of consultation and engagement in order to get to the overall objectives.

This is not to say that government is not doing a lot of work that you could link back to this. It's going from the work you're doing in linking it back, versus starting from the SDGs and deciding how we are going to meet the high-risk areas for Canada.

● (1150)

Mr. Mike Bossio: As we've discussed with regard to some of your previous reports, a lot of the data and actions that we're taking aren't reflected within the reports because of the nature of the reports. This is not a criticism of what you're doing at all, in any way, shape, or form, but I guess what I'm trying to get at is that since then, with the new investments that we've made in budget 2018, it's too early yet to really be able to provide an accurate picture as to what we're doing overall as a government. Just as with our climate plan and achieving our 2030 goals, it's going to take a number of years before we start to see that come to fruition.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Well, as auditors, we were looking for that planning framework, right?

Mr. Mike Bossio: Right. I realize that.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Have you got the engagement? Have you got the resources? Have you done your communication? Has somebody said, "This is important"? Also, then, have you got your measuring and monitoring system? That's what auditors general have agreed to do around the world. This was our contribution to that.

Mr. Mike Bossio: Thank you, Commissioner, as always.

The Chair: Mr. Fast.

Hon. Ed Fast (Abbotsford, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you for being here, Commissioner. It's good to have you back.

You've voluntarily raised the fact that both Washington state and Alaska have effectively phased out open net-pen salmon farming. Upon what basis were those decisions made? Do you know?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: That is not something I looked into. I simply stated a public fact.

Hon. Ed Fast: Let me then drill down to what's happening in Canada. You raised some concerns about the monitoring and about some of the lack of knowledge there is within the federal government with respect to the challenges facing salmon farming. Are you suggesting that the science with respect to the declining salmon stocks is not yet complete?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Science is never complete, right? You can always keep studying things.

We did find that the government was looking at some of the science on disease and parasite transmission, the effects of drugs and pesticides, and the genetic interaction, so it's not as if they were doing no science. They are doing some science. When we looked at the governance structure around diseases, drugs and pesticides, escapes, and enforcement, we found some significant gaps, which we highlighted in the report.

Hon. Ed Fast: Just for the record, because there are people watching across Canada, perhaps you could highlight what those shortcomings were.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: We found several.

In terms of monitoring the health of wild fish, at this point the department had made a commitment to complete 10 risk assessments for the principal farmed-fish diseases. They had only completed one out of 10. We also found that between the CFIA and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans it was not clear whose role and responsibility it was to deal with new and emerging diseases. There's one issue around known diseases, but what about the new and emerging ones? It's not clear which department would be responsible for that.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans did not know if regulations on the use of drugs and pesticides were sufficient to protect the health of wild fish. As I said earlier, there were no limits on the use of drugs and pesticides, and they did not know if they needed regulations to assess the cumulative effects of drugs and pesticides.

As I've already said, they had no threshold for action when wild fish stocks decline; no validation of industry self-reporting on the use of drugs and pesticides; no requirement to minimize the development of resistance to drugs and pesticide; and, no requirement to monitor the ocean floor. On issues related to enforcement of aquaculture regulations, we found that discrepancy that I also mentioned around the research.

We've made some recommendations to the department.

They should articulate the level of risk to wild fish that they are willing to accept when enabling the industry, and they've accepted that. Also, they have to complete their risk assessments of the key diseases, and they have a plan for that. They also have to figure out how to to handle new and emerging diseases, which was one of our recommendations. As well, they need to update a program to audit the farmed-fish health, which they've agreed to do. They need to publish information on diseases, parasites, drugs, and pesticides, because that information was not being made public in a timely way. Also, we made a recommendation that they start speaking to their counterparts in the Atlantic region to think about national standards for equipment.

● (1155)

Hon. Ed Fast: Thank you very much.

I'll give the rest of my time to my colleague Mr. Albas.

Mr. Dan Albas (Central Okanagan—Similkameen—Nicola, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Commissioner and your staff, for the work you do for Canadians.

Just quickly, you mentioned that there's been some prioritization by DFO to do industry research versus doing research that would be of more public value on wild salmon. You've made a few references to their not necessarily having owned up to their obligations under the act. Do you feel this is a case of regulatory capture, or is there just an overly cozy relationship right now in terms of priorities? Is it just a case of economics, that you can do more science with fewer dollars because there's industry support? I'd like to get a sense of where the department is on this.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Are you speaking specifically about research?

Mr. Dan Albas: I'm speaking specifically of a very well documented situation where a government organization that is supposed to do work for the public ends up being captured and does work on behalf of an industry, rather than acting as a referee. I don't think that's necessarily the case, but given that I have not done the work that your office has, I'd like to hear whether you think that is an issue in the case of western open net fish farming.

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I'll be as quick as possible. I've already indicated that I think the department is at risk of people claiming that it might prioritize the industry over the protection of wild fish, and I've already explained why they are at risk of that.

In terms of the research, to be very specific, we found that the department provided short-term funding for research that focused on informing policy and management decisions. In contrast, the department provided long-term funding for collaborative research to advance the sustainable aquaculture industry. In our view, the department needs to provide long-term funding for research on the effects of aquaculture activities on wild fish. That's in paragraph 1.25.

The Chair: That's excellent, right on the button. Thank you very much.

Mr. Fisher, you have a short time. We're almost out of time.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you folks for being here.

Sorry I'm not going to get my full time, but I just want to touch a little on what Mr. Bossio said, and I'll try to be as short as I can. The resources put in budget 2018—money for biodiversity, species at risk, and recovery initiatives—amounts to some $1.3 billion over five years, yet you said we lacked resources. Is that money going to jumpstart this process—and here I include the sustainable development goals unit for monitoring and reporting. Are these steps in the right direction getting us to where we need to be in terms of achieving our targets?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: I can tell you that we'll be auditing the implementation of the use of those funds after they've been dealt with.

Mr. Darren Fisher: That's fair enough. Very quickly, Madam Chair, the inventory, the natural capital, and the 10% marine protected areas, are those successes?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: Yes.

Mr. Darren Fisher: How do you feel those departments got to those points?

Ms. Julie Gelfand: In the case of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, there was a five-point plan to get to the 10% of marine protected areas. In the case of the natural capital and Statistics Canada, to be honest, they came up with that on their own, so it's a result of leadership within the department.

Mr. Darren Fisher: That's great. Thank you.

Thanks, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank Ms. Gelfand and her team for their excellent work on their reports and their great answers to the questions.

We're now going to bring in the departments for us to delve a little deeper.

We're going to suspend for a few minutes to bring in the next panel.

● (1155)

(Pause)

● (1200)

The Chair: We're going to resume the meeting.

We only have an hour, but quite a few witnesses in front of us. I know we'll want to ask questions, so I'd like to preserve as much time as I can for questions.

With that in mind, we've asked all of our presenters to keep their comments within five minutes. They have been gracious enough to give us their presentations, so we have the details in front of us, but they're being asked to try to keep within the five minutes.

I will introduce our guests. You are all over the place, so I will leave it at introductions and then you can announce yourselves as we go through the presentations.

With the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, we have Philippe Morel, assistant deputy minister, aquatic ecosystems sector. We have Jean-François LaRue, director general, aquaculture management; and Wayne Moore, director general, strategic and regulatory science.

We also have, from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Jaspinder Komal, executive director and acting chief veterinary officer, animal health directorate. Welcome.

From the Department of the Environment, we have Hilary Geller, assistant deputy minister, strategic policy branch. We have Sue Milburn-Hopwood back with us again, assistant deputy minister, Canadian wildlife service; and we have Basile van Havre, director general, domestic and international biodiversity policy.

From Parks Canada Agency, we have Rob Prosper, vice-president, protected areas establishment and conservation; and Kevin McNamee—welcome back—director, protected areas establishment and conservation.

From Global Affairs Canada, we have Deirdre Kent, director general, international assistance policy; and Laird Hindle, deputy director, development policy planning.

There are a lot of you in front of us today. We thank you very much for being here. We look forward to your testimony and to the questions that will follow.

Who would like to start?

Thank you very much, Mr. Morel.

● (1205)

Mr. Philippe Morel (Assistant Deputy Minister, Aquatic Ecosystems Sector, Department of Fisheries and Oceans): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you for inviting us today to speak to the CESD report.

As you are aware, Fisheries and Oceans Canada was implicated in two of the commissioner's reports: the audit on salmon farming, and the audit on conserving biodiversity. At DFO, we welcome the CESD's reports and the conclusions on how to improve salmon aquaculture governance in Canada and how to advance our work in the conservation of Canada's biodiversity.

Firstly, I would like to speak to the audit on salmon farming. Aquaculture is an important economic sector in our country, generating close to $2 billion in total economic activity. In 2016, over 3,000 Canadians were directly employed in aquaculture, mainly in the rural coastal areas, including many indigenous communities. Aquaculture is not only a federal economic priority, but many provinces and territories have also identified the sector as an opportunity to grow.

DFO's role is to develop and enforce regulations that support the sustainable development of the sector. Provinces and industries are better placed to promote economic growth. DFO also provides science to support decision-making. We operate in the context of close relationships with provinces and territories to support the growth of aquaculture in Canada in a way that respects the environment.

The report tells us that we can still improve. As you know, the audit makes eight recommendations to DFO on managing the risks associated with salmon aquaculture in order to protect wild fish, one of which also implicates the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Overall, the report indicates that while DFO does carry out significant scientific study in salmon aquaculture and has management measures in place to mitigate the associated risks, there is still work to be done. We agree with the recommendations set out in the report and are advancing work to regulate one of the fastest-growing industries in the country.

[*Translation*]

We are committed to regulating, together with our provincial and territorial partners, a sustainable and responsible aquaculture sector. We are moving forward on meeting our Cohen Commission commitment of completing key disease risk assessments by September 2020. All of the risk assessment analyses are planned. We published the first one recently, and we expect to publish four more in the near future.

In collaboration with CFIA, we are also clarifying roles and responsibilities for managing emerging diseases by establishing more formal governance. We are working closely with our partners and stakeholders in aquaculture management to ensure our decisions relating to aquaculture are made transparently, based on the best available science, and clearly communicated to Canadians.

We have begun strengthening our science communications. You should be aware that at the beginning of February, Minister LeBlanc announced that Canada's chief science advisor, Dr. Mona Nemer, will be leading an independent expert panel to provide advice on the appropriate use and consideration of scientific evidence in decision making on aquaculture, and the communication of science and decisions to Canadians.

● (1210)

[*English*]

Further to this, we are participating in the interdepartmental science review to inform the development of a risk-based decision model on setting thresholds on drugs and pesticides.

We are advancing work to strengthen our aquaculture regulations and enforcement capacity by developing additional measures to increase our capacity to respond to aquaculture enforcement incidents. We are examining options to publicly report information collected under the aquaculture activity regulations. In addition, we are collaborating with our counterparts in the provinces, territories, and with international colleagues to explore options for national standards on aquaculture equipment, by means of a feasibility study. The recommendations set out by the commissioner will help ensure DFO continues to support sustainable aquaculture management.

With regard to the audit on conserving biodiversity, like the audit on salmon farming, we agree with all recommendations. As the commissioner pointed out, DFO will reach 10% of marine protected areas by 2020. We are now at 7.75%.

In addition, DFO understands the importance of public reporting and we will continue with the two key public reporting initiatives, the annual environmental sustainability indicator report and the report on the status of protected areas.

The Chair: Are you close to the end of your remarks?

Mr. Philippe Morel: I'll just close here.

In closing, I just want to emphasize the fact that on species at risk —on the target, too—we do focus on aquatic species. We will continue to address the backlog and to move forward on the new species.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I am sorry to keep it short. I know we'll get into some of those issues with the questions.

Mr. Komal, would you like to go next?

Thank you.

Dr. Jaspinder Komal (Executive Director and Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer, Animal Health Directorate, Canadian Food Inspection Agency): Yes. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good afternoon. My name is Jaspinder Komal. I am the executive director of the animal health directorate at CFIA and also the chief veterinary officer.

My remarks will be very brief. I appreciate your invitation to be here today and for giving me the opportunity to speak to the recommendations in the commissioner's latest report on salmon farming as they pertain to the CFIA.

The spring 2018 reports of the CESD make eight recommendations related to managing risks associated with Canadian salmon aquaculture in a manner that protects wild fish. I'll be focusing my comments on the single recommendation that relates to the CFIA. I will address what the CFIA is doing in response, but for now let me talk a bit about the CFIA's role.

The CFIA is a science-based regulatory agency. Our business stems from a very broad mandate that encompasses food safety, animal health, plant protection, and market access.

[*Translation*]

Safeguarding food and the health of animals is essential to enhance the health and well-being of Canada's people, environment and economy.

● (1215)

[*English*]

The CFIA is committed to protecting wild and farmed aquatic animals in Canada, and is responsible for preventing the introduction or spread of aquatic animal diseases from finfish, molluscs, and crustaceans, which have the potential to seriously impact aquatic animal health, the Canadian economy, and international trade.

As the report itself points out, the CFIA and Fisheries and Oceans Canada co-deliver the national aquatic animal health program, with Fisheries and Oceans Canada's contribution being that of laboratory expertise. Under the national aquatic animal health program, the CFIA has the lead role for activities such as monitoring the presence of disease, declaring the official disease status of bodies of water, controlling the movement of aquatic animals between bodies of water of different status, and responding to outbreaks of disease as appropriate.

I will now address the recommendation.

The recommendation made in the CESD report is that the CFIA and Fisheries and Oceans Canada should clarify their roles and responsibilities for managing emerging disease risks to mitigate the potential impacts of salmon farming on wild fish.

[*Translation*]

We welcome the CESD report on salmon farming and its conclusions on how to improve salmon aquaculture governance in Canada.

[*English*]

We are already working on these measures.

The CFIA and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans are in the process of developing a formal process to evaluate emerging aquatic animal diseases, and to decide the roles of the two federal entities with regard to such diseases in order to protect wild fish. Technical staff working at the agency and at Fisheries and Oceans Canada began engaging this fiscal year, 2018-19, with implementation to take place by April 2019.

Thank you.

The Chair: That's excellent. Thank you very much.

Ms. Geller.

Ms. Hilary Geller (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy Branch, Department of the Environment): Thank you very much to the members of the committee for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Government of Canada on its commitment to implement the 2020 agenda for sustainable development, both at home and abroad.

I'd like to acknowledge my colleague, Deirdre Kent, who is the director general for international assistance policy at Global Affairs Canada, and whose group, among other things, is leading the development of Canada's voluntary national review report, which will be going to the UN in July.

[*Translation*]

As you know, five federal departments have been identified as leaders in preparing Canada for the implementation of the sustainable development goals: Employment and Social Development Canada; Environment and Climate Change Canada; Global Affairs Canada; Indigenous Affairs Canada; and Status of Women Canada.

[*English*]

Together, we appreciate and welcome the commissioner's interest in the 2030 agenda and in ensuring that Canada is on track to effectively support all 17 sustainable development goals. The government agrees with all the commissioner's recommendations, including developing a governance structure, establishing an inclusive engagement strategy, and developing national targets and sustainable development goals specific to Canada. The five audited departments are working actively together to respond to all of these recommendations.

As the Auditor General noted, many government priorities, such as taking action on climate change, renewing the government's relationship with indigenous peoples, advancing gender equality, and working to ensure a safe, clean, and sustainable environment already support the 2030 agenda.

Internationally, Canada is contributing to achieving the SDGs through programs such as the new feminist international assistance policy, the progressive trade agenda, and the second national action plan on women, peace, and security.

The government is committed to building on these successes and elevating the good practices embedded in these programs to bring together a comprehensive and cohesive approach to the SDGs. One example of this was announced on April 17, when the government said that it was taking steps to develop such a national strategy. It launched a voluntary national review web portal to learn about how Canadians are helping to advance the SDGs both at home and abroad.

Over the coming months, the government will reach out to Canadians, including indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector, and other levels of government to develop a national strategy that will catalyze action on the SDGs across Canada. We will work with all partners to build awareness among the public and to foster new partnerships and networks to advance the SDGs. We will take steps to ensure all federal departments and agencies integrate the SDGs into their policies and programs, and a robust SDG team will be established to coordinate and to support these efforts. This team will also help to gather data, report, and communicate on progress towards the SDGs.

Finally, the government is committed to continuing to work through Statistics Canada with the United Nations and Canadian partners on the global SDG indicator framework to help both Canada and the world measure our progress.

In recognition of the complex nature of coordinating the SDGs, as has been mentioned, budget 2018 proposed a significant investment of $49.4 million over 13 years to establish an SDG unit that will provide overall policy coherence and coordination, and to fund monitoring and reporting activities by Statistics Canada.

To further facilitate meaningful engagement, the budget also proposed providing just under $60 million over 13 years for programming to support implementing the SDGs. This means developing a national strategy in consultation with all levels of government, indigenous peoples, the private sector, academia, and civil society to catalyze action, build awareness, and foster new partnerships and networks to advance the SDGs.

Canada's efforts to implement the agenda will be presented in July at the UN, where we will also put forward our first national review.

With that, let me conclude. Thank you.

● (1220)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Kent, would you like to go next?

Ms. Deirdre Kent (Director General, International Assistance Policy, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Not yet.

The Chair: Okay.

Ms. Sue Milburn-Hopwood (Assistant Deputy Minister, Canadian Wildlife Service, Department of the Environment): Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I'm here today with Basile van Havre, director general of domestic and international biodiversity policy at the Canadian Wildlife Service.

I will focus my remarks on the commissioner's report on conserving biodiversity. We welcome the commissioner's recommendations, and are taking actions to ensure that they are addressed. The Government of Canada is committed to meeting its international commitments for biodiversity.

As you know, biodiversity conservation is a shared responsibility. Achieving Canada's national biodiversity targets requires action and support across all levels of government, indigenous peoples, and many others.

The 2020 biodiversity goals and targets for Canada were developed following an extensive collaborative process. Our government, working with partners, has already taken actions to make progress on those targets. The Government of Canada is equally committed to fulfilling its obligations under federal wildlife legislation, including the Species at Risk Act. We are working with provinces, territories, and indigenous people on the protection and recovery of Canada's species at risk—including caribou, which were mentioned in the report—using robust recovery plans based on the best available science and traditional knowledge.

The Government of Canada developed a three-year plan to address the backlog of 149 terrestrial species eligible for listing under the act. Since February 2017, final listing decisions have been made for 76 of these species, and proposed listing decisions were published for another 13.

The Government of Canada has also addressed the backlog of overdue recovery documents for terrestrial species. As of today, 178 of the 192 overdue proposed recovery documents have been completed and posted on the species at risk public registry.

In February, since the report was completed, we published the action plan on boreal caribou, and yesterday we published a report under section 63 of the Species at Risk Act on unprotected critical habitat for boreal caribou and the steps that are being taken to protect that critical habitat. We will continue to work with provinces and territories, who are the leads for lands under their jurisdiction, to ensure the protection of boreal caribou critical habitat and to meaningfully advance protection and recovery measures for this iconic species. This includes ongoing efforts to establish conservation agreements with provinces and territories, and to formalize commitments and accelerate actions to protect and recover boreal caribou.

We are also working with Parks Canada, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and our provincial and territorial colleagues to protect 17% of terrestrial areas and inland waters and 10% of marine areas by 2020. My colleague from DFO has already has already spoken about the marine component, and my colleague from Parks Canada will say more about the terrestrial target.

● (1225)

[*Translation*]

Through budget 2018, it is proposed that $1.3 billion be allocated over five years to protect Canada's ecosystems, landscapes and biodiversity. This investment will directly contribute toward reaching our targets for protected areas, protecting and recovering species at risk.

The funds allocated in budget 2018 will allow us to: increase our efforts to protect species at risk; put in place new recovery measures for priority species, areas at risk and threats to our environment; advance implementation of SARA by supporting species assessment, listing, recovery and action plan activities; expand national wildlife areas and migratory bird sanctuaries; improve the management of our protected areas; and establish a coordinated network of conservation areas by working with provincial, territorial and indigenous partners.

[*English*]

For the other 19 targets, all partners are engaged in assessing progress against our commitments as part of the "Sixth National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity", due in December 2018. This report will provide important information on the status of biodiversity, and from that we'll look at how best to collectively address the challenges and gaps.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I know you have much more to share with us. Unfortunately, we don't have that much time.

Mr. Prosper is next.

Mr. Rob Prosper (Vice-President, Protected Areas Establishment and Conservation, Parks Canada Agency): Yes, thank you very much.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee. Parks Canada welcomes the commissioner's report and agrees with the recommendations related to Parks Canada.

Parks Canada is the federal agency charged by Parliament through the Parks Canada Agency Act with protecting a network of natural and heritage places that include 46 national parks, 171 national historic sites, four national marine conservation areas, and one national urban park.

Our network of protected areas play an important role in helping communities and the ecosystems they depend on to adapt to and mitigate impacts of climate change by protecting and restoring healthy, resilient ecosystems and contributing to the recovery of species at risk.

Under the Species at Risk Act, Parks Canada is responsible for the protection of individual species found in our heritage places. This accounts for approximately 200 species that occur regularly on our lands and waters and approximately 40% of the species listed under the act. Parks Canada has now completed all 76 recovery strategies and species management plans for which we were the lead agency, including all seven progress reports, meeting all legal requirements in this regard.

Under the Species at Risk Act, an action plan must be prepared following the completion of a recovery strategy. An action plan outlines the activities required to address threats to improve the species' status. Currently the agency has completed 21 multi-species action plans covering 174 species occurring in our places, and priority recovery actions identified in those plans are implemented through the agency's conservation restoration program, which is a rolling fund of $84 million over five years.

In short, national parks and national marine conservation areas are places that play an important role in species and habitat conservation, encouraging research, protecting traditional lands of important indigenous people, and inspiring conservation actions beyond their boundaries. These places have an important role to play in the establishment of a network of connected, protected, and conserved areas, underpinning Canada's international and domestic commitment to protect 17% of its land and fresh water and 10% of its marine areas by 2020—as you know, an objective known as target 1.

Based on the most current data, 10.5% of Canada's land and fresh water is protected by federal, provincial, territorial, and indigenous governments and non-profit and private sector organizations. Of this, Parks Canada currently protects 3.4% through established national parks.

Parks Canada's continued contribution to target 1, in both terrestrial and marine environments, will be pursued through the expansion of its system of national parks and national marine conservation areas protecting natural areas representative of Canada's landscapes. To date, 30 of 39 terrestrial regions are represented and five of 29 marine areas are represented.

It is important to stress here that the basis of Parks Canada's terrestrial and marine systems plan is protection of representative natural areas, which is a key qualitative element of the international Aichi protected area targets of Canada target 1.

On the terrestrial side, Parks Canada is pursuing the establishment of the proposed Thaidene Nëné national park reserve in the Northwest Territories. This park will protect parts of the annual ranges of three barren-ground caribou herds and will ensure that the cultural connection to this place by indigenous peoples will be maintained for generations to come.

As another example, in October 2017, the governments of Canada and British Columbia, along with the leadership of the Okanagan nations, announced the launch of a tripartite process to establish a national park reserve in the south Okanagan.

On the marine side, Parks Canada is pursuing the expansion of its national marine conservation area system, including in the Churchill and Nelson rivers, James Bay, southern Strait of Georgia, and les Iles-de-la-Madeleine.

In August 2017, the governments of Canada and Nunavut and the Qikiqtani Inuit Association, signed a historic memorandum of understanding declaring feasible the establishment of a national marine conservation area in Lancaster Sound.

● (1230)

Despite all of our efforts, Canada target 1 will not be achieved by the federal government alone. Over the past 15 months, the pathway to Canada target 1 initiative has succeeded in creating a unique alignment of federal, provincial, and territorial departments responsible for parks and protected areas, along with two national indigenous organizations.

Advice has been received from a national advisory panel, an indigenous circle of experts, and a consensus report from this committee.

In closing, given that the majority of Canada's terrestrial area is crown land, managed by provinces and territories and subject to the terms of treaties, including comprehensive land claim agreements and legal obligations under section 35 of the Constitution Act, reaching target 1 will only be possible if we maintain and broaden the collective momentum established under the pathway initiative.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We only have time for one round of questioning. I'd like to welcome MPs Rosemarie Falk and Larry Miller to the committee.

We'll start with Will Amos.

Mr. William Amos (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our fine public servants. We appreciate your testimony before us. There are too many interesting topics to discuss today. I'm going to focus a quick question on the SDGs and then shift most of my time on conservation.

Last July I had the privilege of delivering Canada's statement at the high-level political meetings in New York on the SDGs. It was definitely an eye-opener. I wonder if you feel that the Canadian public is sufficiently aware of the SDGs and understands how they relate to the implementation of domestic policy. I think one of the biggest challenges for Canada is convincing the public of the relevance of these SDGs. I don't think the average Canadian sees goals established by the UN as something concrete in their day-to-day life. How can we improve that situation?

Ms. Deirdre Kent: Thank you very much for the invitation to today's committee meeting.

As you've highlighted through your question, the engagement of all Canadians will in fact be critical to Canada's achieving the SDGs, and this is the case for all countries. It is a universal agenda, which means that it's global. It's not only for developing countries. It's also for Canada and Canadians and all levels of government.

In fact, there is room for greater awareness amongst Canadians and at all levels of government. The announcement by the government on April 17 of the plans to develop a national strategy recognizes this, that we will be developing a national strategy in consultation with the private sector, academia, civil society and all Canadians. The new SDG unit will be critical to building that awareness.

On April 17 we online a new web portal that is meant to help build that awareness. It is asking Canadians to provide their contributions to how they're helping achieve the SDGs.

● (1235)

Mr. William Amos: Thank you for that.

I would simply editorialize on your last point that I think one of the most important outreach opportunities will be with our municipalities, because they are close to our citizenry and they have that opportunity to connect directly. In my experience, federal government consultations that reach out sometimes do not quite get to every single small town and city across the country.

Shifting to the conservation issue, I want to congratulate our Environment Canada and Parks officials on the successful work they did to convince the finance minister to invest in the way that he did in conservation. That's a major achievement.

I want to go very specifically to the issue of how we understand those funds will be disbursed. There are a number of local conservation groups, national conservation groups, and other interested parties who have contacted me to ask how they can engage with the federal government and at a regional level to best enable partnerships in the manner that it seems the federal government is heading so that local conservation initiatives can be supported.

In the riding of Pontiac there are groups that who are very interested in supporting protection of the forêt Boucher. There are other groups who are very interested in establishing a regional network of protected areas in collaboration with the provincial government and the Algonquin. How can they best engage in the process with the funds that are now available?

Mr. Rob Prosper: Perhaps I'll start and my colleague Sue Milburn-Hopwood could close out.

I would say, as you know, the work that has been done on the pathway to Canada target 1 over the course of the last 18 months has really focused on reaching the numerical target, but not only the numerical target. It's also looking at making sure that the places that have been identified to reach that target are effectively managed. I would say that the most transformative element of the pathway process is the connective landscape approach, and that with new tools and by increasing the number of players involved in conservation, taking a landscape-connected area approach is going to bring all of these new ideas into play for conservation.

On the investment side, I'll refer to my colleague.

Ms. Sue Milburn-Hopwood: We are in the process of standing up the nature fund that is referred to in the budget, which is a $500-million investment over five years. We we will see that matched through partnerships with corporate entities, not-for-profits, and federal and provincial governments and organizations.

There will be lots and lots of opportunities. I would just ask you to hold on for a little bit, and when we have the details of that fund worked out, we will be reaching out. There will be opportunities, both on the species side and in protected areas, in a number of different programs that people can express their interest in obtaining funding from and partnering with governments to achieve these conservation outcomes.

● (1240)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sopuck.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Thanks.

I will follow up on something Mr. Amos said, but I'm not going to be quite as polite. I'm getting really tired of civil servants listing the groups they are talking to—these provincial, territorial, indigenous groups, academics and so on. Rural communities, natural resources communities, and municipalities are never ever mentioned in those lists, and this simply must stop, because those communities are extremely critical in the delivery of conservation, and their efforts and their position and authority need to be recognized.

Ms. Milburn-Hopwood, when you do a recovery plan under SARA, do you do a socio-economic analysis of the potential impacts of recovery plans on communities?

Ms. Sue Milburn-Hopwood: The objective of a recovery strategy is actually to determine the needs of the species in terms of what is needed for it to recover, or to protect it. When we move into the action planning stage, which is part of the recovery process, that's when we start looking at the socio-economics and the numbers of ways one might protect or recover that species.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Given the woodland caribou issue and the amount of land people are talking about conserving for woodland caribou habitat—which, by the way, will not be effective no matter how much land you do conserve—communities in northern Alberta are absolutely terrified about the future of their communities given the case of the Northern Goshawk in northern B.C. Ironically, the Northern Goshawk in B.C. is a subspecies of an extremely abundant bird, so you have some problems with COSEWIC in delineating what a species is.

More on the good news front, Ms. Milburn-Hopwood, I'm a big fan of your SARPAL program, which is species at risk partnerships on agricultural lands. It's working very successfully.

Could you describe that program?

Ms. Sue Milburn-Hopwood: The SARPAL program is called the species at risk partnerships on agricultural lands, and it was really a pilot initiative. We are in the fifth year of five-year initial funding but it will be extended.

Essentially it allows us to work with agricultural partners, whether they be ranchers or farmers or other folks, to actually help them figure out what needs to take place on the landscape to actually protect or recover the species.

We have had a lot of success in this pilot and currently have conservation agreements with over 46 landowners under which we work with the agricultural partner to determine what needs to be done, and we wrap that up in an agreement and there is some funding to support that partner.

It is a very successful program, and we look forward to continuing that program.

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Yes, I know. In southwestern Manitoba, I've been informed by scientists who've been doing research there that the species at risk are primarily found only on land that is ranched a certain way. As you well know, the Audubon Society has a program called the conservation ranching program. This leads into the issue of active management for the recovery of endangered species. I certainly hope, Ms. Milburn-Hopwood, that that very successful SARPAL program continues and is expanded.

Mr. Prosper, regarding national parks.... As you know, I live right next to Riding Mountain National Park. I was talking to a staff person there, and there's aspen encroachment in the prairie areas. As you know, the rough fescue prairie is an important habitat and is very much at risk.

Do you intend to take the bull by the horns, as it were, and start doing some active vegetation management in a park like Riding Mountain National Park, to conserve the rough fescue grasslands and to provide more habitat for the very important Manitoba subspecies of elk?

Mr. Rob Prosper: I don't know that I have the information specific to Riding Mountain. We do have a very active vegetation management program wherein we utilize prescribed fire—this is the fire season right now—to manage landscapes in favour of those types of ecosystems that, in the absence of natural fire, won't continue. We do have a very active program of maintaining grasslands through fire.

● (1245)

Mr. Robert Sopuck: Yes, I strongly support that approach. Perhaps it's the farmer in me, but I think that because there are no fires in our national parks anymore, we have to step in and do something. I applaud Parks Canada for that.

Dr. Komal, I'd like to talk to you about CFIA. This is not related to your testimony. The wildlife groups across Canada are very concerned by CFIA's withdrawal from the chronic wasting disease file or management of this very significant disease that has the potential to decimate wild ungulates, especially deer and elk.

Will CFIA be in a position to come back to the CWD file? If not, why has it abandoned that file?

The Chair: Please give a very brief answer. You've got about five seconds.

Dr. Jaspinder Komal: Thank you, Madam Chair.

We moved from managing the program in one way to a different way, because we were looking at how the management of the program was responding to what we were trying to do. We were trying to eradicate CWD from Canada. We were not having any success, and we were paying money in compensation.

I just want to make sure that the member knows that CFIA's responsibility is for the farmed animals. We work with other partners to make sure that diseases in the wildlife are taken care of. Depending on where wildlife is, there's a responsibility of different partners to work on it. We're trying to work with them to make sure that we are minimizing the impact of CWD in Canada, both on the domestic and the wildlife sides.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I'm sorry to have to cut that off.

Ms. Duncan.

Ms. Linda Duncan: I'd like to start with a reminder of why we've invited all of you stellar federal officials to come before us. It is because of the significant failings identified, yet again, by the commissioner of the environment and sustainable development on your delivery of the sustainable development goals, or delivery on the international commitments and legal duties to protect biodiversity. It's a very clear report with a long list of failings. One of the strongest ones from the commissioner is that the Department of the Environment has failed to provide the necessary leadership across agencies.

I would like to have your deputies here because they give you your marching orders, and it is a question that has plagued our country since I started in this work 50 years ago.

My question for the ADMs here is, to what extent is the direction to maintain friendly federal-provincial relations prevailing over your ability to deliver on your international commitments and your legislative obligations on threatened species?

Anyone can start. We're running out of time.

Ms. Sue Milburn-Hopwood: Just to make sure that I understand, the question is on the extent to which we will be working with provinces—

Ms. Linda Duncan: No. My question is very clear.

To what extent, do your marching orders from above, that you need to maintain friendly federal-provincial relations, prevail over your actually delivering on your responsibilities under Canadian legislation, for example, under the SARA?

Ms. Sue Milburn-Hopwood: The government is very committed to delivering on its responsibility under the Species at Risk Act. You will see, on the boreal caribou, that we are rolling out the responsibilities that we have. We are working with the provinces. Should we need to take further action under the act, the minister is prepared to do that.

Ms. Linda Duncan: I am glad you raised the boreal caribou, because that's one of the clear areas, including the mountain caribou, where the federal government is not intervening or meeting either of its responsibilities that were included in the timeline. We know there are two herds of mountain caribou in B.C. They are essentially extinct.

The other way I would put my next question to you is as follows. Given the responsibilities and commitments to sustainable development and the protection of biodiversity, and to the rights and interests of indigenous peoples, particularly treaty rights, why did these agencies not intervene to raise concerns about the transboundary impacts of the Site C dam, and about potential impacts to the world heritage site?

● (1250)

Ms. Hilary Geller: On the Site C dam in particular, I don't think either my colleague, Sue Milburn-Hopwood, or I are in a position to comment given the nature of our responsibilities.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Is there nobody present who can speak to the responsibilities of protecting the biodiversity at that world heritage site?

I guess my question would be, in what circumstance would Parks Canada, or Wildlife Services, or Environment Canada see an obligation or be directed to have an obligation to intervene, and refuse a major project like the Site C dam, and identify the impacts and potentially address what the mitigation measures might be?

Mr. Rob Prosper: As you know, in terms of the mission for Wood Buffalo and the identification of the key challenges to maintaining the universal values of Wood Buffalo under the convention, we have a process to respond to that, including a strategic environmental assessment—

Ms. Linda Duncan: Because the Mikisew called for it.

Mr. Rob Prosper: —and an action plan.

There are going to be a wide variety of players involved in the response to that, because we're dealing with species, with the Peace-Athabasca delta, with water flows, and so on. There are a variety of both federal, provincial, and territorial jurisdictions responsible for some of those areas as well as for our relationship with indigenous people. The action plan will spell out how each of those parties plays a role in pursuing the action plan, so that the park does not get inscribed as a place in danger.

Ms. Linda Duncan: You're talking about the strategic plan that UNESCO directed.

Why did none of your federal agencies intervene in the hearings on the Site C dam to identify those before the project was approved?

Ms. Hilary Geller: That's a question that we'll need to get back to the member in writing.

The Chair: Can you send it back, so all of us can read it?

Ms. Hilary Geller: Of course, yes.

The Chair: Please send it to the clerk who will then distribute it to the committee.

Ms. Linda Duncan: I am simply raising that issue, because over and over again the commissioner's reports are saying that, on biodiversity, the government likes to attend international meetings. It forms committees and so forth, but the commissioner is not seeing any action on the ground. One of those actions would have been, in the old days, 30 years ago, the federal government actually holding joint reviews, or appearing and providing testimony and research.

The Chair: We look forward to the response.

Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thanks, folks, for being here.

Madam Chair, just to let you know, I'm going to split my time with Mr. Aldag because we're running out of time.

The Chair: Okay. I'll let you know at three minutes.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Sure. Thank you.

I guess my question would be for Rob, Kevin, or maybe even Hilary, but I think I'll lean toward Rob.

We did our report on protected areas, and we realized how difficult it is to hit our targets and our commitments for protected areas. We've heard today, as we hear all the time when we talk to government officials, about partnering with provinces, territories, and indigenous governments.

One of the specific recommendations in that report was to partner with municipalities in addition to provinces, territories, and indigenous governments, to find a way to utilize those generational opportunities to hit those targets. I'm thinking about the Blue Mountain—Birch Cove Wilderness Area in Halifax. That's a municipal park. Again, I call that a generational opportunity to acquire protected areas in the Halifax area that you can access on a city bus.

I know there's been no ask municipally, but I guess my question for you would be whether we are taking that recommendation seriously as a government. Are we looking at moving in that direction? Are we going to be partnering with municipalities in projects like that?

I'm not sure who wants to take that.

Mr. Rob Prosper: Thank you very much for the question.

With respect to an individual or specific place, I probably can't answer that, but one of the areas that the national advisory panel and the national steering committee looked at was not just large landscapes, but small landscapes. There was a special working group for municipalities that provided advice to the national steering committee on municipalities. That was driven largely by our experience in the Rouge National Urban Park, which is creating a stepping stone for a variety of Canadians, who otherwise wouldn't be able to get to conserved areas or to participate in conservation, to get their feet wet in a place that's accessible by GO train. We recognize the role that urban...and municipalities can play, and we did get some good advice from that municipal working group.

● (1255)

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you.

The Blue Mountain wilderness area is our Rouge, so I thank you for that answer.

I'll pass my time to Mr. Aldag.

Mr. John Aldag: I'm going to direct my questions to the Fisheries and Oceans representatives.

In the discussion with the commissioner I raised a question. In her response, she indicated that with the role that Fisheries and Oceans has of overseeing the public interest in protecting our wild fish stocks—particularly salmon on the west coast—and also the role of essentially being the champion for aquaculture, there is a risk of criticism.

Because we are being broadcast today, I want to give the department an opportunity to respond. Is this something that Canadians should be concerned about, or are you able to fulfill those those dual mandates within the department?

Mr. Philippe Morel: First, I would like to maybe explain a little bit more about how we manage aquaculture in Fisheries and Oceans. My sector manages the aquaculture program. What we do is develop, amend, and manage the regulations that manage the aquaculture sector. The science sector also provides some science advice on how we do those regulations and implement them.

It's important to note that our role is not to promote the industry; the industry does that itself. Because it's a shared jurisdiction, the provinces are the ones promoting the industry. I think one of the members in earlier discussion did mention the very aggressive role of some provinces in bringing new investments to their region. Newfoundland is one example. Nova Scotia is another. Our role is to develop and implement regulations that support the industry, so we have to make sure that our regulation is sustainable for industry and that it supports the growth of the industry.

Mr. John Aldag: All right. We're going to run out of time here.

I also want to ask briefly if you can provide a comment on the following. I know that Fisheries and Oceans was really decimated in 2012 with the budget cuts imposed by the Conservatives under their deficit reduction action plan. I was really pleased to see that although the commissioner pointed out there were some deficiencies in research in some key areas, the department does seem to be finally recovering from that.

Are you positioned now to move forward with an aggressive research program on the kind of work that needs to be done to give Canadians the confidence that we will have sustainable fish stocks and healthy populations? I would appreciate any comments on that. I heard Mr. Sopuck make a comment that we've had record Fraser River salmon runs, based on their policies, and yet the science programs were decimated. Do you have any comments on where you are now, to carry forward with the research programs?

Mr. Philippe Morel: I will share 30 seconds with my colleague, Wayne Moore.

The regulations that we have to manage the pesticides and the drugs in the ocean are very strict on the potential impact. They are done in a way that minimizes the impact on fish and habitat. Additionally, we will be working on the cumulative effect highlighted in the report.

Mr. Moore can tell you more about the science we do to protect wild fish.

Mr. Wayne Moore (Director General, Strategic and Regulatory Science, Department of the Environment): Thank you, Madam Chair, for the member's question.

I will highlight a couple of points. I think the reinvestments that have happened over the last few years have been really important, specifically with Pacific salmon. We have hired 29 new scientists in the Pacific region to work on this. We have an extensive set of work that has been done to date on aquaculture and the interaction with the wild fish, along six themes. That work is all on our website. People are free to see what work we've done in those areas, including related to the cumulative impact of pesticides.

I will leave it there, Madam Chair.

● (1300)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

As the chair, I very rarely ask a question, but I really want to ask something in response to discussions that have been going on today.

I want to amplify the comments of Mr. Sopuck and also my colleagues on the Liberal side, who have mentioned that it is about bringing all partners to the table. Municipalities have a very strong role, and I'm glad to hear they are at the table.

What I reflected on as I was listening to your comments is that conservation authorities in Ontario are big holders of conservation land. You mentioned the public having a chance, through Rouge, to get to see conservation first-hand. I have to say, there's a lot of that activity going on, on conservation lands. I haven't heard conservation lands mentioned at all.

Can you tell me where conservation lands, especially in Ontario, are fitting into this work on target 1?

Mr. Rob Prosper: Sure.

One of the things we were tasked with by the federal, provincial, and territorial ministers was to look at the accounting of what type of conservation works. I think we're coming to the conclusion that we need to expand the role and recognition of those areas that contribute to the target, and start working. As I said, the transformative element of the pathway initiative is really a connected network of conserved areas, which will take many different forms. It includes industry, agriculture, conservation authorities, and so on. It's going to be this collective that will make the difference.

The Chair: I'm very glad to hear that.

Thank you very much to all of you for being here today and answering our questions.

I want to remind the committee that we're back on Bill C-69 on Thursday with the minister and the departments.

The meeting is adjourned.

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